SC 084 Mass Media in American Society
Fall 2008
T Th 9am, Campion 328

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“The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power. Because they control the minds of the masses.” – Malcolm X

“Today we are beginning to notice that the new media are not just mechanical gimmicks for creating worlds of illusion, but new languages with new and unique powers of expression.” – Marshall McLuhan

Course Objectives

The power and effect of the media has been long debated, and continues to be important to understand in the context of many changes in American society. This course is dedicated to investigating mass media in America, its nature and role in our lives, and its relation to American notions around race, class and gender. This course will heavily stress the ability to engage critically with the products of mass media from news broadcasts to advertising, from television to the Internet.

As this is a core course, we will be looking at the sociology of mass media with an eye towards the following concerns:

1) **The Perennial Questions**: An examination of mass media can help us think about larger questions in society, such as: How do we know when something is “true”? How open to manipulation are human beings? Do we want to be manipulated? Is a free society possible?

2) **Cultural Diversity**: A number of readings will address the issue of cultural diversity in 21st century society, in order to appreciate the great variety of ethnic, racial, cultural perspectives and influences, as well as the ways the media can both limit and enhance such diversity. **Please note**: This course does not satisfy the official university cultural diversity requirement.

3) **Historical Perspective**: We’ll look at the mass media in a historical context, especially with regard to the development of cultural theory and the evolution of media as connected to technology.

4) **Methodology**: We’ll pay attention to the various ways the media can be studied, including organizational, interview and content analysis. You’ll learn how to study media from a sociological perspective.
5) **Writing Component:** There is a strong writing requirement in this course. You’ll be expected to react to the works we read and be able to perform your own analyses of media, as well as integrate the cultural perspectives considered in class.

6) **Creating a Personal Philosophy:** You’re encouraged to develop your own philosophy about the importance and relevance of mass media, both in your life and in an academic sense. Mass media undoubtedly had a presence in your life before this class. Hopefully, you will view it with a new lens by the end of the course.

**Course Requirements and Expectations**

*Please silence your cell phones before class!*

1) **Class Attendance and Participation:** Everyone is expected to attend class and participate in discussions and exercises. I take daily attendance. More than 3 unexcused absences will affect your grade. Each additional unexcused absence will lower your final grade by one point. Excused absences, including approved athletic events, medical appointments, and absences cleared by the dean will not lower your grade. I also expect you to arrive to class on time. Repeatedly late arrivals to class are disrespectful to everyone and will also affect your grade.

2) **Assigned Reading:** You should come to class having read all assigned material, in order to contribute to discussion and keep up with course material. We may have in-class writing assignments throughout the semester, which will rely on you having done the reading and you will lose points if you are not prepared. You will be expected to do 8 online reading responses, and lead one class discussion on readings as part of a team.

3) **Papers:** There will be 2 paper assignments throughout the semester. These will be an opportunity for you to critically connect concepts introduced in class to your real-world experiences with media. More detailed assignments will be given out when the time comes. Late papers will be penalized.

4) **Exams:** There will be in-class mid-term and final exams which will cover the core material of the course.
Group Presentation and Discussion Leading

Once during the course of the semester, you will be required to present the readings and lead discussion for one class, in teams of six. There will be a sign up sheet the second week of class for discussion dates/topics. The discussion should last about 30 minutes, and should address the following:

- The major arguments of the day’s readings. This should be presented on a handout to all class members and the instructor.
- Your analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the readings.
- Discussion questions concerning the readings as they related to other class materials and relevant current events. You will begin the discussion with these questions, but you are not required to lead the discussion per se.
- Each team member should talk. You may come up with creative ways to get the class to talk.
- Your group will hand in all your prepared materials to the instructor. The group will receive a grade based half on preparation, and half on the presentation/discussion.

Reading Responses

This class deals with complex ideas that require regular and thorough completion of reading, and preparation for discussion. To ensure that you do the reading, you are required to complete **eight (8) responses on course readings, to be posted on the class Blackboard Vista site**. Guidelines for responses are as follows:

- They must be posted as a reply to the appropriate posting on the course website.
- For some (but not all) of the readings, you will be given specific questions to reply to.
- They must be at least 200 words in length (and aren’t expected to exceed 300 words).
- They are due by **8 a.m. the day they are listed on the syllabus.** Late responses will not receive credit.
- They must discuss **all the readings** listed in the heading in the context of issues raised in the class. These writings can be quite informal, but thoughtless or cursory thought-pieces will not receive credit. They must be in your own words, and must respond to the readings, not reiterate the lectures. You are also encouraged to respond to other students’ thought-pieces in your postings. Your postings should not just repeat points that other students have already made.
- These responses are worth 15% of your grade. Only **one posting a week** will be counted as part of the required eight.
- These responses will be graded check-plus, check or check-minus, with the rough translation being (check plus = 100), (check = 90), and (check minus = 80). Every missing thought-piece at semester’s end will cost you 12.5% of this portion of your course grade, so make sure you pace yourself with these responses so you will not come up short at semester’s end.
  - √+: **An excellent response.** You clearly understand and engage with the readings and focus on major points/arguments from them. You are able to
cohesively tie the readings together (if there is more than one). You make sophisticated connections from the readings to the real world. This is reserved for truly excellent responses.

- **A good response.** Most responses will receive this grade. You make a good attempt to engage with and understand the readings, to tie them together and to address major arguments, or points of interest. You may also make good connections from the readings to the real world. Your analysis remains more of a surface reading/summary than a plus response.

- **A fair response.** You seem to have done some of the reading but do not demonstrate a clear understanding of the major points/arguments. There may be some factual errors/misunderstandings that could have been avoided from more focused reading. You don’t really engage with the reading.

- **No grade:** You will NOT receive credit for responses that are less than 200 words (so check your wordcount!). You will not receive credit for responses that do not clearly show that you have done the reading. I will not automatically tell you if you did not receive credit for a response, so be conscientious!

- There will be **no makeups** available for responses, so keep track of how many you have to do! I will update you at mid-term as to how many you have done and your current grade. You may also ask me at any time.

**Grading**

Your grade will be based on the following elements:

1) Attendance and Participation  10%
2) Group Presentation/Discussion  10%
3) Reading Responses  15%
4) 2 Essay/Media Analysis Assignments (4-5 pages)  10% each
5) Mid-term Exam  20%
6) Final Exam  25%

**Total:**  100%

**Academic Honesty**

You are responsible for adhering to the statement of academic honesty in your Student Handbook and at [www.bc.edu/integrity](http://www.bc.edu/integrity). Plagiarism is a serious offence and any evidence of it, or other breaches of integrity, will be referred to the dean and the Committee on Academic Integrity.
Disability Statement

If you have a disability, please let me know about it at the beginning of the semester so that appropriate accommodations can be made.

Keeping in Touch with Me

I encourage you to drop by during my office hours if you have any questions about the readings, assignments, or concepts in general. I am also happy to make appointments outside of these hours. The best way to contact me is through my email listed at the beginning of the syllabus. I check my email frequently and will get back to you as soon as possible.

Required Readings

The following book is available in the BC Bookstore:


Other readings will be available on the Library’s Course Reserves (marked as * in the syllabus), or on the course’s Blackboard Vista site (marked as Vista).
Course Schedule

PART I. WHAT IS MASS MEDIA?

Week 1: Introductions
Sept 2  Introduction
Sept 4  What is Mass Media?
  • C&H: Chapter 1, “Media and the Social World,” p. 3-13
  • *Raymond Williams, “Masses,” p. 192-197

Week 2: Theories of Mass Media/Origins
Sept 9  The Sociology of Media
  • C&H: Ch. 1, “Media and the Social World,” p. 13-30
  • *Kellner and Durham, “Adventures in Media and Cultural Studies,” pp ix-xxxviii
Sept 11  Ideology
  • C&H: Ch. 5, “Media and Ideology,” p. 159-168

PART II: POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE BUSINESS OF MEDIA

Week 3: Political Economy of Mass Media
Sept 16  The Business of Media
  • C&H: Chapter 2, “The Economics of the Media Industry,” p. 33-76
Sept 18  Regulation and the “Public Interest”
  • C&H: Ch. 3, “Political Influence on Media,” p. 77-98
  • *Habermas, Jurgen, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article,” p. 136-142

Week 4: News and Politics
Sept 23  The News Media
  • C&H: Ch. 4, “Media Organizations and Professionals,” p. 121-135
  • *Postman, Neil, Ch. 7, “Now…This” from Amusing Ourselves to Death, p. 99-113
Sept 25  Politics
  • C&H: Ch. 7, “Media Influence and the Political World,” p. 231-253
  • *Berger, Arthur Asa, “Political Advertising,” from Ads, Fads and Consumer Culture, Ch. 6, p. 87-99
Week 5: Consumer Society

Sept 30    Consumer Society

Oct 2

Week 6: Advertising

Oct 7

Assignment 1 due in class

Oct 9

Oct 14    IN-CLASS MID-TERM

PART III: THE CONTINUING EVOLUTION OF MEDIA

Week 7    Post-Modernism

Oct 16

Week 8

Oct 21
  * McKibben, Bill, “Daybreak” from The Age of Missing Information, p. 8-36

Oct 23    New Media and Technology
  * C&H: Ch. 9, “Media Technology and Social Change,” p. 299-333
Week 9:
Oct 28  New Media and Technology
•  *Jenkins, Henry, “Interactive Audiences? The ‘Collective Intelligence’ of Media Fans” from *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, p. 134-151

Oct 30  Globalization of Media
•  C&H: Ch. 10: “Media in a Changing Global Culture,” p. 337-372

PART III. AUDIENCES AND REPRESENTATION

Week 10: The Power of Content and Media Effects

Nov 4
•  C&H: Ch. 8, Active Audiences and the Construction of Meaning,”” p. 265-298

Nov 6  Violence and Media Effects
•  *Sternheimer, Karen, “do videogames kill?” from* *Contexts* 6(1), 2007: p. 13-17
•  *Seiter, Ellen, “Lay Theories of Media Effects,” from* *Television and New Media Audiences*, p. 58-90

Weeks 11-13: The Social Construction of Race, Class and Gender in Media

Nov 11  Inequality and Media
•  C&H: Ch. 6, “Social Inequality and Media Representation,”” p. 195-200
•  *Dyer, Richard, “Stereotyping,” from* *Gays and Film*, p. 27-39
•  *Wilson, Clint C. and Felix Gutierrez, “Advertising and People of Color,”” p. 283-292

Nov 13  Race and Class
•  C&H: Ch. 6, p. 200-212
•  *hooks, bell, “Eating the other: desire and resistance,” from* *Black Looks*, p. 21-39

Nov 18  Race and Class
•  C&H: Ch. 6, p. 216-224

Assignment 2 due in class

Nov 20  Gender
•  C&H: Ch. 6, p. 212-216, 224-227
• **Vista:** Ouellette, Laurie, “Inventing the Cosmo Girl,” p. 117-128

Nov 25  Gender
• **Vista:** Gamson, Joshua, “Sitting Ducks and Forbidden Fruits,” from *Freaks Talk Back*, p. 553-570
• **Vista:** Raymond, Diane, “Popular Culture and Queer Representation,” p. 98-110

Nov 27:  HAPPY THANKSGIVING!

**Week 14:**
Dec 2  Lingering Debates/Issues and Media Reform
• Watch “Save the Internet”: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWt0XUocViE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWt0XUocViE)

Dec 4  Wrap-Up and Review

**FINAL EXAM:** Tues, Dec 16  9 am